



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE

PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE

BETHESDA 14, MD.

NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH  
OLiver 6-4000

June 14, 1960

Mrs. Mary Lasker  
3600 Prospect Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mrs. Lasker:

As a consequence of inquiries made to you by Senator Styles Bridges, you recently asked me for additional information about the grant-supported research of Dr. David Riesman and the unfavorable review by the press of the paper growing out of this work. It is a pleasure, therefore, to give you some additional factual information about the Institute's support of this project.

The research grant in question was awarded to Dr. Riesman while he was at the University of Chicago and concerned with the study of leisure time activities as one of the indications of the way people exhibit some fairly important things about their personality structure, their modes of adjustment, and therefore something about their personality integration and mental health. The grant was for a period of five years, in the amount of \$89,811, and bore the title, "Functions of Play in Developing Adulthood". At a later date, Dr. Riesman transferred the activities of the grant to Harvard University, where he is now on the staff.

Actually, Dr. Riesman is interested in the role of interpersonal relationships from childhood through adolescence and adult years in determining personality structure and the ways in which people meet the demands of life and the particular environmental situations they face. There has been much work done by psychiatrists, psychologists, and other social scientists concerning the interactions within the family and to some extent within work situations, but relatively little work concerning interpersonal relations in day to day experience, especially those that occur in social settings and during leisure time activities. It is obvious, however, that the personality of the individual expresses itself as much in these relationships as it does in the more intimate conditions of the family or the more controlled conditions of the work situation. It was,

therefore, Dr. Riesman's hope that he could find, through the study of leisure time activity, some keys to personality functioning and some understanding of the value of social activity for helping the person to develop a way of life meeting his psychological needs.

To study human behavior of this kind is a difficult task, and on this project Dr. Riesman chose four approaches. First, he studied close friendships with the hope of understanding the way in which one receives assistance and support from one or more persons in meeting his problems and maintaining his psychological equilibrium. Second, he studied the sociability pattern among professional people as one way of analyzing how the professional maintains a clear perception of his role and his effectiveness in his chosen field. Third, he studied some of the patterns of social interaction among college students at a summer camp as a way of determining the level of psychological maturity shown by young people at this stage of their development. Finally, he made an effort to study adult behavior at social functions, including what one would generally call parties. The range of functions studied included all types of social gatherings, including those devoted entirely to sociability. He reported this work concerning informal social gatherings in a professional journal, Human Organization, in the form of an article under the title, "The Vanishing Host", (Vol. XIX, Spring 1960, pp. 17-24). It was this article which has received unfavorable attention from the press.

It is very difficult for me to say whether or not the criticism of Dr. Riesman's article is fully justified. Certainly a careful reading of it will indicate that he has not been able to develop a methodology which gives clear, classifiable phenomena that occur at parties and other social functions. It is also clear that he has made a sincere effort to develop methods for observing these situations and for trying to understand the pattern of social interaction which goes on. I am sure he would be one of the first to admit that it is difficult to gain really basic understandings of human personality in this setting, although it is quite apparent that personality characteristics of people do express themselves in these situations. As a consequence, the report is essentially non-quantitative and descriptive, and could lead many readers to feel that it deals with unimportant material. It is my belief that it deals with important material but that it fails to achieve in a completely satisfactory manner all of the objectives which Dr. Riesman set for himself. One must, however, remember that research from the standpoint of an investigator

is always something of a gamble; his efforts may lead to highly valuable findings, or they may lead to somewhat inconclusive observations which are interesting and valuable, but not capable of precise formulation in theoretical or scientific terms. It is my personal belief that this is what happened to Dr. Riesman in the present instance.


If the individual investigator makes a gamble in dedicating a part of his time and professional career to the pursuit of a particular piece of research, so does an organization engaged in support of research make a similar gamble when it chooses to support a particular application. Dr. Riesman is considered one of the very distinguished social scientists of the country and has received wide acclaim for some of his publications; for instance, the book entitled "The Lonely Crowd", which was written primarily for a scientific audience but which has been read by wide segments of the population because of the insightful way in which it deals with life patterns in this country in the present era. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Mental Health Study Section and the National Advisory Mental Health Council chose to support Dr. Riesman's work. Neither is it surprising to many that all parts of the research may not have come to the type of fruition which was hoped for by both the investigator and the Study Section. I am not pessimistic about the results of this investment in the work of Dr. Riesman, because I feel that he or other persons will find leads in this work that will later give us better understandings of human functioning than we now have. Sometimes the intermediate development of ideas and concepts appears to be somewhat unclear and unpromising, but in most cases work resulting in this stage of conceptual organization represents ground which must be covered if the same investigator or others are finally to achieve more precise and clear understanding of the phenomena in which they are interested. To be very clear about the matter, it is my feeling that Dr. Riesman has made a contribution to the field, but not one as outstanding as he himself may have wished or as those who know his work might have anticipated. I feel further that he has laid the groundwork for further approaches to the problem which may result ultimately in our understanding of some of the ways in which people maintain their personal sense of integrity under the rather stressful conditions of modern life. It is gratifying to me that only a small number of the research projects which this Institute has supported have been the subject of unfavorable review either by professionals or the public. Something on the order of six to ten projects have over

the years been criticized, which is not a very large number in view of the fact that there are over 800 grants currently receiving support by the National Institute of Mental Health. I cannot tell you at the moment how many grants have been supported over the last decade, but it is a large number.

As you know, every effort is made to screen all awards very carefully, first through study by a group of highly specialized non-government research personnel and later by review of the National Advisory Mental Health Council, which is a statutory body whose favorable recommendation must be received before the Surgeon General may make an award. It is my firm conviction that this system has worked with astounding success and that very few serious mistakes have been made in evaluating research proposals. I do not feel that the present grant was a mistake, but I can understand why those without the total background and understanding of the problems of awarding research funds might come to this conclusion.

I hope that these remarks concerning the way in which grants are awarded and the problems of the investigator as well as those who make the awards will help you to understand that some projects supported by any funding organization are almost certain to receive criticism. Your interest in our activity is greatly appreciated, and I shall be glad to give you any further information you may wish about this matter.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'R. H. Felix', with a stylized flourish at the end.

R. H. Felix, M. D.

Director

National Institute of Mental Health